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Julie Pelletier receives alumni association teaching award

Summary: Assistant Professor of Anthropology Julie Pelletier is this year's recipient of the UMM Alumni Association Teaching Award. Thanks to the generosity of the UMM Alumni Association, the Morris campus recognizes its outstanding professors through this annual award, created by the alumni in 1994.

(April 7, 2008)-Julie Pelletier is a storyteller. As such, she has an opportunity to learn about the world and how she understands it. Storytelling is also how she can "relate material and concepts my students need to learn and understand to examples from their own lives." " she said.

Pelletier, an assistant professor of anthropology at the University of Minnesota, Morris, is this year's recipient of the UMM Alumni Association Teaching Award.

Thanks to the generosity of the UMM Alumni Association, the Morris campus recognizes its outstanding professors through this annual award, created by the alumni in 1994. This honor was bestowed for the first time in the spring of 1997. The purpose of the award is to honor individual University of Minnesota, Morris faculty members for their outstanding contributions to undergraduate education.

Although Pelletier knew about her nomination for the award, she was "shocked" to learn that she is the recipient.

"It is such a humbling experience to be chosen," she said. "Reading the letters of recommendation for this award—letters from former and current students and from colleagues whom I deeply respect as teachers—brought me to tears. When you consider the caliber of the teachers at UMM—I am honored to join the ranks of teachers whom I consider role models."

Pelletier also serves the campus as an assistant professor of American Indian Studies and co-founder/ co-coordinator of the American Indian Studies Program.

She holds a doctorate in anthropology from Michigan State University and did her dissertation on "The Role of Ritual in a Contemporary Ojibwa Tribe." In addition, she holds a master's in anthropology and a bachelor's in the social sciences.

Her UMM colleagues say: "Dr. Pelletier's teaching style is remarkable in that she is able to put students at ease with her humor, while capturing the interest of her students by supplementing the course materials with her own experiences in the field."

"Dr. Pelletier sets high standards for her students and advisees while providing an open and approachable atmosphere for students and advisees to air concerns or receive guidance," said one student. "She sets a great example of what is attainable with higher education to American Indian youth as well as helping them explore the welcoming environment UMM provides for American Indian students."

A particular observation made by friend and English professor Bill Willan during her senior year as an undergraduate has in part laid the foundation for how Pelletier mentors students today.

“When I expressed my worries about attending graduate school, he told me that I would succeed because I was too stubborn to fail,” shared Pelletier. “It didn't matter if I wasn't the absolute genius of my program or wasn't as well prepared as some, coming from a very small school with just one anthropology professor. What would matter would be my willingness to do whatever it took to earn that Ph.D. and being too hardheaded to quit.

“He was right. I didn't remember telling this story to a young woman who entered my graduate program just before I finished, but she approached me at our national conference about three years ago and told me that those words helped keep her going when she wanted to give up. I've passed on this advice to my students as well. Determination and will can defeat barriers that others or even that we ourselves put up between ourselves and our goals.”

Many of Pelletier's former students—who are either in graduate school or have recently graduated—keep in touch with her. An alum shared recently that she is not challenged by her graduate classes after earning a bachelor's degree from UMM.

“This is not the first time an alum has commented on the rigor of our programs and on how well they were prepared for graduate school. I write recommendations for alumni who are applying for graduate programs or for jobs and this network of former students is now reaching out to my current students through me to provide connections for internships, scholarships, graduate programs and jobs. I hope that I've contributed in some way to the success of my former students but in the end, they are the ones who have to do the hard work, building on the foundation of a solid undergraduate education,” said Pelletier. Although she admits to a certain bias due to her own public liberal arts college education, she believes that UMM's reputation for academic excellence is well deserved.

“I came to UMM excited by the possibilities that this institution has to offer—the freedom to develop courses I want to teach, the small class size, the opportunity to participate in academic advising, bright and motivated students, a faculty that prioritizes teaching while remaining committed to research, student involvement in research, a conscientious support staff and the American Indian Tuition Waiver.

“UMM's strengths in the area of liberal arts education are in the presence of professors in the classroom instead of teaching assistants, in the caliber of students admitted to UMM and in the support and expertise provided to both faculty and students by a dedicated and knowledgeable staff,” she said.

As for those students who have yet to graduate from UMM: they are distinctive as well, said Pelletier.

“I'm sure that I annoy and bore colleagues at conferences by droning on about how special UMM students are,” she shared. “Of course, any potential eye-rolling tends to stop when these colleagues realize there are so many UMM undergrads attending the conference and, wait, UMM undergrads are presenting their own research at the conference as well! In addition to being academic overachievers, UMM students are also unusual in their commitment to social causes. They give so much of their time, passion and talents.”

It hasn't gone without her students' notice that Pelletier gives back to them as well. And so the storytelling continues.

Photo by Sarah Deutl '11, Anoka

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